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ABSTRACT

Discussed are relations between developmental constraints provided by the social environment and children's growing understanding of interpersonal roles and commonly occurring social events. Findings from studies of children's social participation in three contexts are presented: child-teacher interaction at preschool snacktime, child-adult interaction in a simulated store, and child-child interaction during competitive exchanges in a preschool. Each study used a different method to gather data. Ethnographic, experimental, and ethological approaches were used. Child-other interaction in the three contexts is discussed as simultaneously supporting intra- and inter-individual co-construction of social events, conventions, and relationships. It is concluded that children's understanding of the social world as reflected by their performance in it need not be considered as following only from structural changes in their knowledge, but can also be fruitfully construed in terms of social transactions that characterize members of social groups. (RH)

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# Social Constraints on Co-Constructed Roles, Conventions and Event Knowledge

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## Social Constraints on Co-Constructed Roles, Conventions and Event Knowledge

Much like children's early contacts with the physical world are viewed as fundamental in theories of cognitive development, early interpersonal encounters provide children with occasions for acting, feeling and thinking which are fundamental to the development of their social understanding. Similarly, just as children's level of sensorimotor development structures their exploratory manipulation of objects, their level of social understanding constrains their choices of action during social exchange, and limits information that they can extract from encounters with social partners. Social partners and social situations provide additional constraints on action that channel children toward socially appropriate understanding of their environment (Strayer, 1980; Valsiner, 1984, 1987; Winegar, in press; Winegar & Renninger, 1985). Constraints are defined as boundary conditions within which some actions of the child are promoted and others are discouraged. Social others, especially parents and teachers, employ a variety of strategies in constraining children's action. Examples of social constraining include tactics such as employing social labels and directing perception through highlighting particular aspects of the environment and ignoring others

(Feurstein, 1980). Further, social partners appear to make adjustment in their constraining activity that are often quite intricate and usually outside of reflective awareness. These adjustments in constraining tend toward a lessening of adult provided constraint as the child increasingly demonstrates self-regulation of their own actions. As such, they can be considered as a kind of instructional "code switching." (Berko Gleason, 1973). It is partially through the guidance provided by the constraining actions of others that children's understanding of their social world emerges from their interaction with others in everyday contexts.

The most functionally adaptive activity engaged in by children is the effective coordination of their actions with the actions of others. Successful social interaction gives the child access to material and/or affilio-affective resources that are important for continuing development. Empirical investigation of children's performance in, and understanding of, their social world provides information about the nature and development of children's ability to negotiate social transactions.

In this paper I want to briefly discusses relations between developmental constraints provided by the social environment and the child's growing understanding of interpersonal roles and commonly occurring social events.

Findings from studies of children's social participation in three contexts are presented: child-teacher interaction at preschool snacktime, child-adult interaction in an experimental store, and child-child interaction during competitive exchanges in the preschool.

In the first setting, eighteen children, age 31 to 57 months, and their teachers were observed interacting as a group during the preschool event -- "snacktime." Seventeen of the children had not attended preschool previously. Teacher direction and child performance during this event was observed and recorded on videotape daily for the first three weeks of school, twice a week for the remainder of the year, and for the week immediately after Christmas break. Observations from the first three weeks of school will be presented here.

All statements made by teachers toward children during snacktime were coded into one of the following four categories: directive statements, non-directive statements, informative statements and social pleasantry statements. Here only the first two categories, directive and non-directive statements, will be discussed. Directive statements were those that made a direct request for children's behavior or change in behavior. Examples of directive statements include, "Sit down in your chair.", "Just take one cracker.", and "Can you ask him to pass the

juice?" In contrast, non-directive statements were statements made by teachers that supported a child's performance but did not make a direct request for the change. Examples include, "Who remembers what we do after we finish our snack?", "I like the way you asked to have the juice passed.", and "Can you pour your juice by yourself?" This category also included statements that offered children legitimate choices of behavior. Examples include, "Would you like more crackers or are you finished?", "When you're finished go sit on the rug unless you have to go to the bathroom.", and "Here's a seat for you."

Frequencies and proportion of type of teacher's statements during snacktime during the first four weeks of school are shown in Figure 1.

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Show overhead 1 here.

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As can be seen, the proportion of the total number of teacher statements that are directive declines over this period of time. On the first few days of school about half of the teachers' statements are in this category. By the fourth week the proportion of directive statements make up less than a third of teachers' total statements. In contrast, the proportion of teacher statements classified

as non-directive shows an increase during this same time span. During the first two weeks of school non-directive statements comprise less that 20 percent of total teacher statements. By the fourth week the proportion of non-directive statements approaches 30 percent of total teacher statements.

This finding has two important implications for the present discussion. First, it shows that social constraining does in fact occur. (No suprise there!) Second, it suggests that the type of social constraining provided by social others changes as children's understanding of an event develops and the children demonstrate increasing responsibility for guiding their own behavior. While this first study illustrates explict constraining by social partners, a second study suggests that such social constraints need not be explicit or intentional.

In the second setting, seventeen 4-year-old children (8 females and 9 males, $M$ = 51.00 months, $SD$ = 5.23 months) individually made repeated trips to purchase a toy in a store established under experimental conditions in their school. An adult storekeeper was instructed and rehearsed in a script prescribing the sequence and timing of permissible actions and vocalizations. Sequence and timing of actions and vocalizations of the storekeeper were

specifically prescribed to provide the minimum amount of information necessary for children's successful negotiation of this event. According to the script, the storekeeper was to allow the child a set amount of time (15 secs.) to initiate each of five action components of the store transaction (i.e., choosing an item for purchase, establishing the price of the item, paying for the item, requesting a bag for the purchased item, and leaving the store). If a child did not initiate a given scripted action within the time limit, the storekeeper proceeded to the next vocalization in the script. In this way adult support in the transaction remained consistent across both children and across trips (though adjusted in relation to a given child's performance on a particular trip).

Children were given 12 cents and individually shown to the store. From the time the child reached the store entrance until the transaction was completed, the child interacted solely with the storekeeper. Children made five trips to the store over two weeks. One week after completion of these trips, children made a purchase in a novel store. Children's actions in both stores were recorded by a stationary video camera unobtrusively placed behind the store counter.

Judges coded the performance of children during their trips to the store (number and sequence of event component

actions initiated), and direction of eye gaze during the transaction (inter-judge reliabilities were r = .95, .96, and .73 respectively).

As measured by number and sequence of event component acts initiated, children's performance in the store continually improved during trips to the store and declined slightly on their trip to the novel store. Greatest improvement on both scores was between Trips 1 and 2 ($F[1,16] = 16.10$, $p < .001$; $F[1,16] = 12.72$, $p < .01$, respectively for number and sequence of actions initiated). Overall, children's performance improved greatly from Trip 1 to Trip 2, continued to improve slightly on Trips 3-5, and decreased on the trip to the novel store (though decrease from Trip 5 to Novel Trips is significant for sequence of acts only ($F[1,16] = 7.31$, $p < .05$).

Direction of children's eye gaze orientation also changed over trips to the store. On the first trip to the store, children referred to the storekeeper more frequently than they did on later trips ($F[1,16] = 34.41$, $p < .001$) Again, greatest change occurred between Trip 1 and Trip 2 ($F[1,16] = 7.32$, $p < .05$). Thus, the proportion of children's total eye gazes which were directed at the storekeeper decreased significantly from Trip 1 to Trip 2, maintained this lower rate on Trips 3-5, and increased

minimally on the trip to the novel store. These results are shown in Figure 2.[1]

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Thus, in this event in which the adult side of the transaction is controlled, children's use of an adult other to provide information supporting successful performance can be readily observed. On their first trip to the store children direct a large proportion of their attention toward the storekeeper. On later trips children's performance in the store improved and the proportion of their gazes directed at the storekeeper correspondingly declined.

In the third setting, sixteen children (8 boys, 8 girls), age 33 to 50 months, were observed during free play. Six 40 minute focal samples for each child were collected over a 3 week period and recorded on videotape.

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1. While for purposes of the present discussion, it is not important whether changes in children's action are considered as changes in performance or competence, other data collected but not presented here suggests the latter. Specifically, children were pre- and posttested using a recognition memory discrimination task using minimally discrepant pairs of pictures depicting components of the store event and then given differential experience in the store. Children making five trips to the store showed significant improvement on the recognition task while those without experience did not.

All videotapes were coded using an event sampling procedure which coded all instances of competition for play objects between children. Initiation and outcome (object loss or resistance) of competitive bouts were recorded. In addition, whether or not the target child of a take attempt had possession of the disputed play objects prior to the competitive episode was noted.

Initial analysis of this study has focused on the existence of a "prior possession" rule which might organize competitive exchanges in this age group. Bakeman and Brownlee (1982) have found that prior possession by the taker predicts the outcome of competitive exchanges in preschoolers but not toddlers. Brownell and Brown (1985) present similar findings but fail to find an influence of a prior possession rule for the target of take attempts.

Distribution of outcome with and without prior possession is shown in Table 1. Several findings are important to the present discussion. First, children are more likely to initiate a take attempt when there has been no prior possession of the toy object by the target child. Second, take attempts without prior possession are more likely to lead to object loss than they are to lead to resistance. In contrast, take attempts with prior possession are more likely to lead to resistance than they

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are to object loss.[2]

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Show overhead 3 here.

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These preliminary findings, taken together with the findings of the previous studies cited above, suggest a different aspect of social constraining. In these instances, the influence of social others is not direct and explicit but rather contextual. At earliest ages toddler's competitive exchanges appear to be guided by a "might makes right" rule. Later, competitive exchanges are guided by a prior possession by the taker rule -- a kind of "take back rule." Still later, competitive changes between preschool children appear to be guided by a prior possession by the target rule -- a "possession is 9/10 of the law" rule. (Or in the preschool we observed, possession is 7/10 of the law!)

Child-other interaction in these three contexts simultaneously supports the development of the child's understanding of social events and conventions and their understanding of social relationships. Further, these findings are interpreted as suggesting that it is fruitful to consider the procedures, conventions and roles of these social transactions as co-constructed both

2. All differences are significant at .001 level or better as indicated by chi-square analysis.

intra-individually and inter-individually. Intra-individually, children's understanding of these transactions is a co-construction arising from their general level of understanding, previous experience in these and similar events, and information provided by the physical and social environment (Wozniak, 1986). Inter-individually, children's and others' participation in these social interactions involves not only the joint co-construction of the actions in the immediate event, but also the negotiation of procedures and conventions as will be applied to future encounters (Winegar, 1986).

Integrating empirical findings from the three studies, it is concluded that children's understanding of the social world as reflected by their performance in it, need not considered as following only from structural changes in their knowledge, but can also be fruitfully construed in terms of social transactions that characterize members of social groups. This suggests that the nature of children's action in, and understanding of, social interactions might not be best described in terms of preplanned, well-scripted sequences of procedures, but rather as co-constructed, interdependent transactions that occur within a matrix of social constraints.

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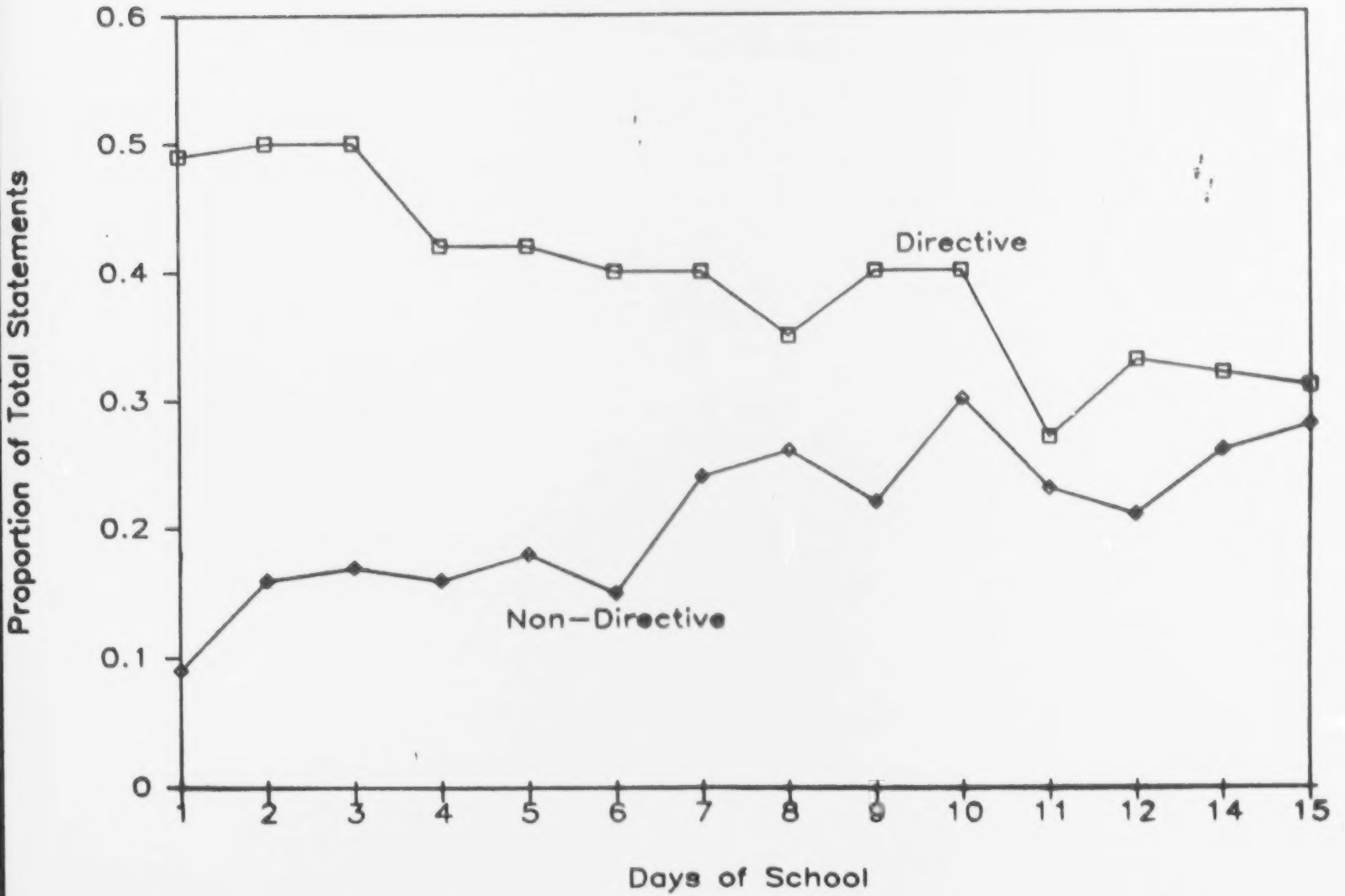
Teacher Statements by Type
Proportion of Total Statements
0.6
0.5
0.4
0.3
0.2
0.1
0
Directive
Non—Directive
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
14
15
Days of School



Figure 1.

# Eye Gaze, Number & Sequence of Acts

(For all Trips n = 17)

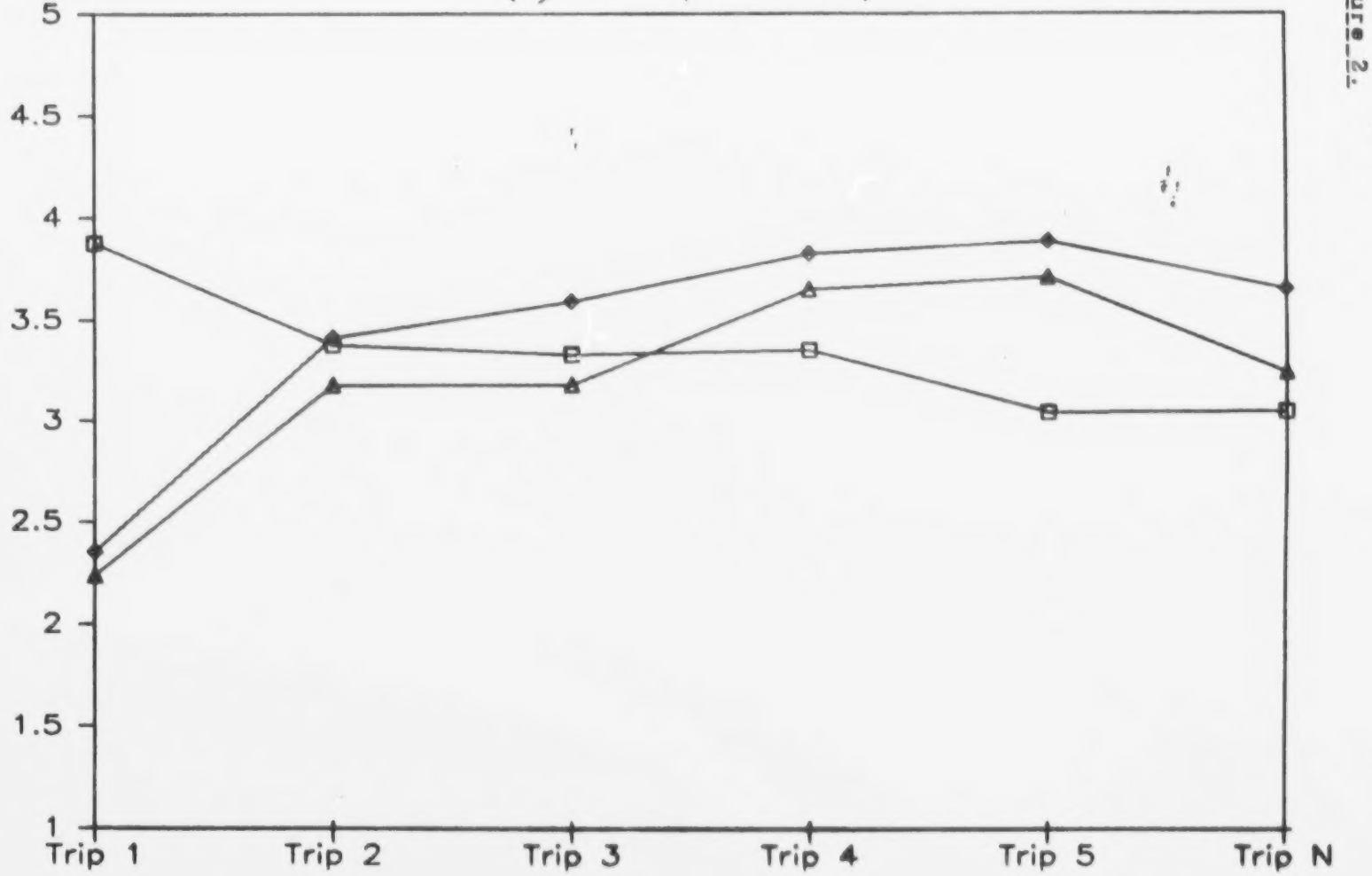


Figure 2.

Table 1.

Frequency of Outcome of Take Attempts With and Without Prior Possession of Play Object By Target Child

| | With Prior Possession | Without Prior Possession | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|
| Object Loss | 25 | 134 | 159 |
| Resistance | 60 | 32 | 92 |
| Total Attempts | 85 | 166 | 251 |

$X^2 = 63.74$, df = 1, $p < .001$